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Comments by the Coordinating Committee for Independent Staff Unions and Associations of the United Nations System

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General transmits herewith for consideration by the Fifth Committee a document submitted by the Coordinating Committee for Independent Staff Unions and Associations of the United Nations System (CCISUA) (see annex).

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Annex

VIEWS OF THE COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR INDEPENDENT STAFF UNIONS AND ASSOCIATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

INTRODUCTION

1. The period elapsed since the forty-sixth session of the General Assembly has been an eventful one for the world at large and, consequently, for the world Organization - the United Nations. In response to new obligations resulting from the end of the cold war, the Organization has moved away from its traditional operations to assume an enhanced role in the highly charged fields of peace-keeping and peacemaking.

2. Against this background of general flux and uncertainties fraught with danger, with new countries emerging on an almost daily basis and with old rivalries resurfacing and armed conflict leading to starvation and death, at a time when all eyes are turned towards it and expectations are running higher than ever before, the United Nations is experiencing internal turmoil of a kind that can only hamper its capacity tc deal with the serious problems at hand.

3. It is true that any process aimed at redefining the role of an institution is bound to be disruptive to some extent. But the disruption should not be of the kind that compromises its capacity to fulfil its mandated role.

4. In the case of the Secretariat as well as of some of the specialized agencies, posts have been cut (in the Secretariat twice already in the last few years) and continue to be cut as part of a streamlining process. At the same time, the conditions of service of staff continue to deteriorate. As a result, the malaise of previous years has yielded to deep discontent.

5. Few, including the staff, will deny that there is room for improvement in the organizations of the common system. At the same time, any attempt at reform will always meet with resistance from the groups directly affected. However, what makes the situation unbearable at the present time is the fact that, at the very moment when more is demanded from the staff following cuts in the staffing tables and the consequent loss of promotion prospects, conditions of service should also be in danger.

6. One can only hope that before it is too late someone, at some level, will recognize the political difficulty and the backlash potential of undermining conditions of service of the common system staff when a radical restructuring process is under way and staff, because of the added peace-keeping and peacemaking responsibilities of the Organization, are being asked to volunteer for activities that often put their lives at risk.

7. The staff have repeatedly expressed their willingness to undertake extra work and have been only too ready to volunteer to do so under conditions of hardship. However, they find it both demoralizing and frustrating to have to work in a climate of uncertainty about their future, including threats of a further erosion of their conditions of service. If the Organization is to run smoothly and efficiently, something will have to be done to dispel doubts and allay fears. Reassuring words that are then contradicted by later actions only serve to increase the level of anxiety among the staff.

8. The staff at large have welcomed the Secretary-General's avowed aim of depoliticizing the Organization. For this to become a reality, such depoliticization will need the genuine support of all the parties involved. Unless there is a firm and unqualified commitment from all participants in this process that allows for no exceptions whatsoever (be they at the G-1 or Under-Secretary-General level) all credibility will be lost and bureaucratic scepticism will be fully justified. Even the perception that some staff are more equal than others and that cuts do not mean the same when one is at the higher levels of the hierarchy can be extremely negative. Never before has high morale been more necessary for the fulfilment of the Organization's aims; never before has disgruntlement been so prevalent.

I. WHAT AILS THE COMMON SYSTEM

9. For years now the staff of the common system have been complaining about their salaries and conditions of service. The complaints are well known to members of the Fifth Committee and do not bear detailed repetition. Sad to say, too, they have mostly fallen on deaf ears.

10. The Member States have been consistently unwilling to admit that there is anything wrong with the system or to do anything to correct it. Comparisons with salary levels in other international organizations like the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development or the European Community have been rejected as irrelevant, even though those organizations are direct competitors with the common system organizations. A review of the best-paid national civil service has been put off by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) and neglected by the General Assembly. Naturally, the staff have found it very difficult to accept such indifference - if not callousness - on the part of their employers.

11. It is true that this sometimes callous approach has not been universally shared or endorsed. Unfortunately, however, those who did not share it and could have championed the staff's cause have mostly shied away from doing so.

12. Meanwhile, some Member States - in particular those that most oppose improvements in conditions of service of common system staff - continue to make supplementary payments to their nationals, thus perpetuating a two-tier system that violates the spirit of the Charter of the United Nations and the staff rules and disregards the strong condemnation of such practices by the Secretary-General. In the general climate of cuts and restructuring,

continuation of this practice can only add to the staff's low morale and discontent. It also exposes a double standard that is impossible to justify and should under no circumstances be condoned.

II. WHAT ROLE FOR THE INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION

13. For years now the staff representatives have also been complaining - mostly in a vacuum - about the functioning of ICSC, the technical body established by the General Assembly to deal with conditions of service of the common system staff. Most of the criticism levelled against ICSC has related to what the staff perceive as the politicization of the Commission, the fact that recommendations and decisions are often made bearing in mind the kind of financial considerations that would be far more appropriate in the context of the informal consultations of the Fifth Committee.

14. In addition, in recent years, proximity to the Fifth Committee has tended to colour the approach of some members of the Commission to the issues at stake. Inevitably, such a tendency is reinforced by the fact that Commission members are elected by the Fifth Committee. In some cases they may even be former members. If the role of the Commission is to be limited to submitting to the Fifth Committee only those recommendations it deems will pass that body, its function as an impartial technical intermediary between the staff and their employers will disappear.

15. For the staff representatives, this new closeness between ICSC and the Fifth Committee has been an added source of frustration. They often encounter in the body where they can represent their positions in detail and defend them on technical grounds the same reaction they are used to getting from the Fifth Committee, where, as experience shows, an argument - however valid on technical grounds - will be set aside in the name of financial considerations.

16. CCISUA strongly believes that the process of depoliticization of the Commission should start with the selection of Commission members. Technical considerations, rather than the political support an individual can muster among Member States and regional groups, should be the primary criterion for the selection of ICSC members. A familiarity with salary systems and a solid personnel management background would not only ensure adequate understanding of the complex technical issues the Commission deals with but would also promote a technical - as opposed to political - approach to them. For obvious reasons, former membership of the Fifth Committee should be considered a liability.

17. CCISUA also deplores that the Commission should have found a substitute for the executive sessions it had vowed to avoid. These sessions are now called "briefings", but they serve the same purpose as executive sessions. On the basis of a unilateral discussion of the issues at stake, without any input from the staff or the administrations' representatives, Commissioners' positions are crystallized which can then rarely be changed in the more formal and restrictive environment of an open meeting.

18. The above considerations are not new. Most were advanced when the functioning of the Commission was discussed in the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC), the Coordinating Committee on Administrative Questions (CCAQ), ICSC and the Fifth Committee itself. However, they bear repeating since these problems have not been solved. If anything, they have been exacerbated. Unfortunately, last year's review of the functioning of the Commission was a good opportunity that was squandered.

19. This year, during the thirty-sixth session of ICSC, CCISUA's representatives decided to suspend their participation in the work of the Commission. CCISUA made clear that, pending confirmation from its constituents, such withdrawal related only to General Service issues - a fact that, deliberately or otherwise, was later misrepresented in the Commission's report. 1/

20. CCISUA's withdrawal was prompted by a procedural anomaly that compromised an unbiased discussion on the item on the methodology for General Service salary surveys. Against its own ruling on how it would proceed on this issue, the Commission moved from the explanation to the decision-making stage without the discussion phase originally envisaged. This deprived the staff representatives of a meaningful input on a question of crucial importance for the staff and subsequently forced them to withdraw from the deliberations.

III. ICSC'S RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY AT ITS FORTY-SEVENTH SESSION

21. This year the Fifth Committee has before it a modest package from the Commission. Recommendations with financial implications submitted to it by ICSC are based on the implementation of decisions made or criteria adopted by the General Assembly in previous years.

22. This is the case, in particular, with the base/floor salary scale. The 6.9 per cent increase in the scale recommended by ICSC in its annual report results directly from the implementation of the relevant decision made by the General Assembly as part of the comprehensive review of the conditions of service for the Professional and higher categories. In 1990 and 1991, the Assembly authorized increases lower than those recommended by the Commission in implementation of the methodology adopted by the Assembly in its resolution 44/198. This created a deficit that the Commission now proposes to eliminate.

23. On the other hand, the increase recommended for the education grant is lower than it should have been if the new methodology for establishing the level of the education grant had been strictly applied. Thus, it does not fully reflect the movement of inflation in education costs in the five currencies for which an increase is recommended by the Commission.

24. In this context, it is important to remember that the new methodology adopted by the Commission for establishing the level of the education grant provides for increases only in those currencies where they are due and by the

individual amount of the increase. Under the previous methodology, an average was granted in all currencies regardless of actual increases.

25. It is in two areas where the Assembly is not called upon to make a decision at the current stage that a note of alarm should be sounded. These two areas are the salary survey methodology and pensionable remuneration for the General Service and related categories of staff.

26. At this point, it is extremely difficult to predict what the outcome of the next series of General Service salary surveys will be. Among other things, it is not easy to gauge the overall impact of a recession that, after becoming deeply entrenched in the United States of America, is now beginning to be felt at European duty stations as well.

27. At some duty stations, however, it is estimated that reductions in General Service salaries could run as high as 20 per cent. In the case of Vienna, for example, just the elimination of the language allowance decided by the Commission at its thirty-sixth session will result in a 4 per cent reduction in General Service salaries at the time of the next survey. At a duty station where General Service salaries are already frozen, this could add 8 to 10 years to the freeze. The Fifth Committee should consider the impact of such a long-term freeze and ask the Commission to review its decision on the language allowance.

28. Taking into account the results of the comprehensive review of the General Service salary survey methodology, CCISUA decided to recommend that its members not participate in the next round of salary surveys.

29. The situation at the level of General Service pensionable remuneration and consequent pensions is also potentially explosive. The Commission, in spite of General Assembly instructions that it act in full cooperation with the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Board in this regard, decided on its own that the income-replacement approach should be used for establishing General Service pensionable remuneration, as is done for Professional staff.

30. In this connection, it should be noted that the Commission's decision on the method to be used for establishing General Service pensionable remuneration was taken in isolation. Indeed, it has postponed making a decision on all other crucial questions regarding the determination of General Service pensionable remuneration. The main of such issues, because of its potential impact, is probably the use of a single scale of pensionable remuneration for Professionals and General Service staff.

31. Depending on the decisions that are made in the future on those issues, General Service pensionable remuneration could be reduced by as much as 20 per cent. Therefore, according to the date of retirement, a staff member's pension could be as much as 20 per cent lower than that of a colleague who retired a few years earlier. The inequity of such a situation should be apparent to all.

IV. CONCLUSION

32. It has often been said that the staff is the Organization's most valuable resource, and, indeed, the staff would like to believe that such a statement is more than an empty formula to be used only for convenient political purposes. At any rate, even the most unsympathetic would have to concede that a motivated staff is essential to the Organization's proper functioning.

33. Leaving the staff in the dark about their future in the Organization - against what can be considered the best in the United Nations tradition of consultation and conciliation - is at this point perhaps the single most demoralizing factor. When combined with unsatisfactory conditions of service and fears of a radical deterioration in the short term - as is the case with General Service salaries and pensions - the effect can be devastating.

34. The Commission has failed, if not refused, to recognize that this is the case. A more flexible approach on the part of some Commissioners could have prevented the staff organizations' walk-out. But the Commission has been so concerned with anticipating the Fifth Committee's reactions that it has relinquished its technical role in favour of a political one.

35. The staff are not opposed to change, but they want to be part of it, as has always been the case in the past. At this point, it is essential to overcome the paralysis of fear (fear for jobs as well as for conditions of service) and start working constructively. It should be recognized that it is hard, if not well-nigh impossible, to do one's utmost to work productively with the sword of Damocles of impending cuts dangling over one's head.

36. To that end, the channels of communication have to be reopened and trust must be restored - trust in the established process and mechanisms for determining conditions of service as well as in the leadership of the Organization.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-seventh Session, Supplement No. 30 (A/47/30).